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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT AU PRINCE 001325

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WHA/CAR
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TREASURY FOR ALLEN RODRIGUEZ, GREGORY BERGER, WILLIAM
BALDRIDGE, LARRY MCDONALD

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN HAITI EXACERBATES
POVERTY

1. SUMMARY: Poor land management in Haiti, caused by poverty, has led to deforestation, land loss, and aquifer depletion. All three exacerbate poverty in Haiti by increasing the cost of food production and dependence on more expensive imported food. Though the Government of Haiti has long known about the link between environmental destruction and poverty, they have been unable to make progress protecting the environment. The current government complains that they lack the information and capacity to act. A new proposed law calls for the creation of a corps of decentralized technical advisors. However, their ability to make significant changes is doubtful; Haiti's dangerous cycle of poverty and environmental destruction will be difficult to break. END SUMMARY.

Arable Land and Water Disappearing

2. Haiti's arable land, aquifers, and surface water are gradually being depleted by a cycle of poverty, land mismanagement and tree felling. Impoverished Haitians have all but denuded the mountains by cutting trees to make charcoal. According to a USAID reforestation report, Haiti is nearly 99 percent deforested. The loss of vegetative cover has accelerated the erosion of mountain farmland and carried sand into the valleys covering farmland. According to Ministry of Agriculture advisor, Jean Arsene Constant, in addition to flood-caused loss of farmland, water absorption and retention in the mountains is insufficient to replenish the aquifers or maintain year-round surface water in many areas.

Higher Cost of Living Exacerbates Poverty

3. Constant also said that environmental degradation raises the cost of living and makes Haitians poorer. Dwindling arable land has caused Haitian farmers to move to less productive land and use more fertilizer to increase their productivity. Both have led to land loss through salinization and increased erosion. Meanwhile, the scarcity of surface water and the depletion of aquifers have caused many farmers to dig deeper and deeper wells; much of the arable land that remains is irrigated from deep expensive wells that tap shrinking aquifers. As farmland and water have disappeared, fertilizer use and well-derived irrigation have increased. As a result, food production has dropped, even though the price of local food has risen, pushing up the cost of living and exacerbating poverty.

Government Historically Ineffective

4. Historically, the Haitian government has been aware of the severity of Haiti's environmental problems and their economic impact. However, they have consistently been unable to make progress protecting the environment. The most recent national environmental plan, published in 1999, is out of date, lacks specific information about the environment, lacks indicators that could be used to track its effectiveness, and is administratively cumbersome. For example, the plan outlines the linked problems of erosion and deforestation, but does not provide any specifics or detailed assessment of either. In addition, beyond creating an administrative body, the plan proposes no means of monitoring or evaluating its own progress. The plan has never been implemented.

Ministries Lack Information and Clearly Defined Roles

5. According to the Minister of Environment, Yves-Andre Wainright, institutional barriers impede progress on erosion

control and water management; the Ministries do not have the capacity or information to make a plan for the environment; and the roles of the ministries are ill defined. Ministry of Agriculture advisors recently complained that they lack sufficient knowledge about environmental problems to create a new national plan. They said, for example, that though they know salinization is a problem for many farmers in the Artibonite Valley, in central Haiti, they know neither the rate nor the extent of land loss due to salinization. Further, they said that they do not have capacity to get the information they need.

16. Wainright also said that the roles of the ministries treating environmental problems have been poorly defined, which has caused conflict among the ministries and stymied action. The Ministries of the Environment and Agriculture have both been charged with environmental protection. However, in the past, the Ministries' disagreements over how to proceed have often prevented them from taking action.

New Framework: Towards Decentralization

17. While there is currently no legislature to pass laws, a framework law developed by the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment in conjunction with NGOs and the private sector was recently released for public comment. The draft law seeks to remedy the lack of environmental information and the poorly defined roles of the Ministries by decentralizing the problem.

18. The law would create a group of 3000 technical advisors, paid by the central government, but trained to work with municipal governments on local environmental problems. Minister of the Environment Wainright was optimistic that these 'environmental police' could redress the lack of centrally held information by working locally. He also hoped that, because municipal governments would direct the cadre of technical advisors, they would be immune to inter-ministerial conflicts.

19. COMMENT: Increased cooperation between the historically at-odds Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Agriculture is heartening. However, the effectiveness of the framework law, which cannot be enacted until a new national government is elected, is questionable. It does not address fundamental issues such as the need to define clear Ministerial roles or build capacity for central planning and coordination. In addition, it is not clear where the IGOH would get the money or the trained professionals to staff and pay for 3000 'environmental police'. Many of Haiti's environmental problems are dire and national in scope; it is unlikely that local advisors alone will be able to break Haiti's cycle of poverty and environmental destruction. END COMMENT.